

IS ENGLAND APATHETIC?

A REPLY.

BY

Sir GILBERT PARKER, Bart., M.P.



*Originally published in the "New York Times" on the
first Anniversary of the Declaration of War.*



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IS ENGLAND APATHETIC?

"The article printed below was sent from England by Sir Gilbert Parker in response to a series of questions cabled to him on the occasion of the first anniversary of the outbreak of war in Europe. Readers of THE NEW YORK TIMES will find the article one of the most striking and illuminating contributions to the literature of the great conflict."—(NEW YORK TIMES, August 15th, 1915.)

YOU ask me to look back over the first year of the great war and tell you what I think about it in relation to several vital factors of England's life.

In one sense, Americans can judge as well as I what has been done; but it is worth saying that, when the unpreparedness of Great Britain and her overseas dominions for a great land war is remembered, the accomplishment is immense.

The strength of the British Army in July, 1914, was not more than 233,000, excluding the reserves, which were 203,000. There are now in training or in the field 350,000 troops of the overseas dominions alone, while this country, on estimate, has at least 3,000,000 men in the field or in training.

We are producing probably 300 times as much munitions per month as we produced in September last, and we have supplied our Allies also with large quantities.

The achievement of our armies and of the Allies, as a whole, has been enormous. Critics, sometimes friendly, occasionally unfriendly, in neutral countries like the United States have pointed in exasperation to the fact that the British armies occupy and fight only 30 miles of front while France holds 500 miles. Reflection ought to make it clear that the length of the front held is not at all a complete test. A sector of 30 miles may be, as the British front is, a vital spot where attack is concentrated and where the position is of a nature that calls for immense sacrifice and for desperate fighting in which men are lost out of proportion to the length of line. That has been the case with the British front. If our Army has been small, it has had to be replaced again and again, and the wastage by wounds and death have certainly represented three times the original strength at the Front. We put less than 100,000 men in the field early in August last. We had lost by wounds and deaths 322,000 up to the end of July, 1915; and we probably have now at the Front three-quarters of a million of men. Is this a discreditable record for a country which relied on sea-power, not on land power, and yet has added to her supreme and immense sea-power land forces outnumbering the regular forces of the United States—also a democratic country with a voluntary system—at least thirty times?

Germany had prepared for forty years for a great European war, in which she would make herself the supreme power of the world, dispossessing Great Britain on land and sea and making it impossible for any other nation, however powerful, to challenge, or to revolt against, her supremacy.

She had laid up great stores of munitions, she had organized for vast production when war should begin; she had, with mathematical precision, meticulously, and with devoted industry made her whole industrial, commercial, and educational life conform to a military organisation for national and imperial purposes. Her object was not the object of nations with civil, humanitarian, and social ideals before them. Power, not the amelioration of human life or the development of individual, independence and character, was her object and her goal.

Therefore, when the war broke out, she had such a military machine as the world had never seen. And it must not be forgotten that Austria, which is so constantly left out of the calculations of the world in thinking about this war, had also made huge military preparations, as was shown by the great guns she brought into the field in the very early stages of the war.

To talk of Germany fighting the world is nonsense. Germany and Austria, two great central empires of Europe, with 117,000,000 of people, are fighting the Allies. In the field of war they were able at the start to put nearly twice as many equipped men into the field as the Allies were able to do.

That they did not defeat the Allies is a marvel.

It is also splendid evidence of the capacity of the Allies and of Great Britain's power; for, though Great Britain's sector of the field of battle has been small, as I have said, her contributions in men have been immensely greater than her critics have stated, and her contributions in other directions have been prodigious, all things considered.

She has had troops fighting in France, Belgium, the Dardanelles, Egypt, British East Africa, South-West Africa, the Cameroons, and the Persian Gulf.

Her Navy has done what was expected of it. It has cleared the open seas of German commerce and German ships of war. It has taken Germany's island possessions in the South Seas, and most of her African territories have been captured because she could not render them any aid by her Navy. It has bottled up the German fleet behind its mine fields, rendering it powerless, and it is now waiting patiently for that Navy to come out and give battle. It has enabled the commerce of Great Britain and her Allies to continue their usual sea-transport of merchandise and food-stuffs; it has made possible the transport of munitions to the Allies; it has intercepted the transport of munitions to enemy countries; and it has safely conducted from all parts of the world, and daily across the Channel, hundreds of thousands of troops. What is more, England's mercantile marine, so the First Lord of the Admiralty informs us, is greater than it was before the war began.

In money and in munitions, and by her sea power enabling the Allies to trade freely, England has played a great part in this

conflict, and presently the part will be gigantic, for she will have an Army of 3,000,000 fully equipped, backed by a preponderating Navy. By next winter her output of shells will give her superiority in that field, and she will be able to supply Russia with much that she needs. It has not been German bravery which has kept Russia back, which has dispossessed Russia of ground won by valour, but shells and guns possessed by the Germans in abundance.

Great Britain asleep! The American nation may be assured, in spite of all carping and pessimistic statements, that Great Britain and her people are awake. No democracy ever produced a voluntary Army approximating three millions in the world's history, not even your United States. You resorted to compulsory service for your great civil war. It may be that we shall not get through this war without compulsory service, but the response to the call of the Government for men has vastly exceeded what was thought possible.

In spite of England's critics at home, whose object no doubt was so to alarm the nation that we should secure the utmost contribution of her strength, it is certain that there is not a street in the most secluded town or village of this kingdom which has not felt the call and contributed, if not to its utmost, then sufficient to show that the utmost will be forthcoming. We are a slow people, but, without boasting, it may be said that we are sure; and that the citizens of this Empire do not love their land and are concerned for its future less than the Germans are for Germany, is a statement which time and fact are belying.

You ask me how, in this limited monarchy, the war has affected the democracy.

First let me say that the democracy governs itself; though it has a king as the permanent and stable element in the Constitution, representing the principles and traditions of that Constitution through their long course of development, by being also the head of his people; the chief of the clan, as it were.

Well, wealth and peace are potent factors in every country toward separating people into classes. Even the United States has not escaped that. Social distinctions quite as imperious as in this country exist there, though they are not so extensive, not so carefully graded.

A great war like this shakes people of all classes and sections together to do the work demanded by the vital emergency.

So it is that a labour leader like Will Crooks, whose opinions have been repeated by many of his colleagues, says that the officer-peer and the artisan-private have shown the same valour, the same sense of duty: that the man of the higher places has, with an unmatched gallantry, risked and lost his life, hand-in-hand with the man on the lower levels.

You ask me if I think that Kitchener's Army is democratic in a wide sense.

Let me say this: that what is called "Kitchener's Army" is the most democratic, and it is probably the best, army that ever took the field since the armies of the civil war of the United States won their reputation.

In it are a very high proportion of elementary school teachers as non-commissioned officers, who are trained to organise and direct, who are typical of the bridging of the gulf between classes by the bond of education.

But not only Kitchener's new battalions are democratised. The professional Army was always a mere handful, and to bring up the required battalions to war strength, to fill the gaps, great numbers of reserve officers and men were called up—"city" men, lawyers, university lecturers, industrial workers, policemen, street car drivers, &c. These took their place in the framework at once.

Hence, the whole of the British armies in this conflict are like the American armies in the Civil War.

They possess the intelligence, method and devoted perseverance, of the Northerners, with the natural aptitude, adaptability, and improvising power of the Southerners.

In this conflict officers and men are brought into much closer association than in any previous wars, since it has been a trench war, and, figuratively speaking, they sleep under the same blanket and eat out of the same dish.

In the close and confined area of the trenches officer and man are shoulder to shoulder, with practically no distinction in dress, while all are practically doing the same thing. The companionship of danger and purpose and endurance was never better manifested.

How many hundreds of stories have we heard and letters have we read from privates, relating how splendid, self-sacrificing, tirelessly considerate for their comfort, and utterly regardless of danger, their officers were; and how many hundreds of letters and how many speeches of officers have we read in which they tell of the magnificent courage, selflessness, cheerfulness and friendship of the private.

Their acts of heroism for each other have produced a great camaraderie. What began in duty has ended in affection.

"He was terrible bad hurt," said a private of his officer in a letter which I saw a day or two ago—"he was hurt so bad he had to groan, and he kept apologizing to us, saying he wished he could help it.

"He was true blue he was, and the hurt he had would ha' made any man squeal.

"Well, we just 'eld 'is hands and done what we could, and one of my pals what was hurt too, he crawled over and he kissed the officer on the cheek, and they was both dead in half an hour. They was both good pals."

Innumerable stories like that have come to us, and I have in my possession letters now, of men no longer living, telling always of the great deeds done by others, and as time has gone on one has learned from others what they themselves had done.

I am not cracking up the bravery of the British officer or soldier, I am only saying that there never was a war in which officer and man, duke and ditcher, privy councillor and miner have so preserved discipline, and yet their personal sympathy, together with the man-to-man attitude.

This is easily understood in a country like the United States, and in all the Overseas Dominions, for the armies of these new lands must have these characteristics; but it was not generally supposed that, in a nation with a hereditary aristocracy, and apparently dependent classes far below, there would be this democratic feeling and action.

I frankly say that I think this war has democratised the British Army enormously, for in the face of vast issues and prolonged fighting, which tests men to the utmost, the private has lifted himself far above his rank in life by the ennobling feeling of doing a great duty, which yet he calls "his little bit."

I have seen this in my own household. A footman of mine, with not much apparent personality or sensibility—as how can a footman have much personality in the somewhat rigid work of a household, with its set and specific duties, with even its below-stairs class distinction?—left me to enlist.

He was gone several months in training. I saw him just before he started for the front. He was not the same man that had been in my service. There was modest self-possession; there was determination; there was the dignity of purpose in his bearing when he said to me:

"I'm keen to get out, Sir. I think I'm fit for it now; and I'll try and get one back at them Germans that aren't content to fight, but have to murder, too."

I had a feeling that he would give a good account of himself. I have had several letters from him; but one, received after he had had his baptism of fire, contains a few sentences which describe a revolution taking place, a development increasing with lightning rapidity in the men on the lower levels in this country; while the man on the higher levels of birth, position, and money has stepped down to the level road, where he and Tommy Atkins are one in temper and in character for the national welfare.

Here are the sentences from my footman-friend's letter:—

"We got as far as where the communication trench began, when the Germans caught us, and the shrapnel they put into us was something terrible.

"I'm not afraid to say that the first half hour of it I was nearly frightened to death. Still, I never lost my head, and my chums were getting knocked over all around me.

"We rushed to a hedge and stayed under it for nearly three hours with the shells ripping up the earth and tearing down trees wholesale. It was not a bang, bang affair; it was one continuous roar of splintering.

"Our next move was up the trench leading to the firing line. It took us just upon two hours, and the sight I saw there I shall never forget as long as I live. The trench was nearly filled with water, and the wounded men, or rather what had been men, now wrecks of flesh and bone, were crawling through this stuff.

“Not till I saw them did I realise how much I wanted to get my bayonet into the body of a German. Perhaps that will come soon. Then I hope the good God will give me courage and strength enough to take a good revenge.

“We left the trench soon after midnight. As we were coming along the road I stayed a few seconds with a few more of the 60th at a house where the trees had been blown across the road, and just as we got to the house a German flare went up, and before we had time to take two more steps three ‘Jack Johnsons’ were tearing the place down about our ears.

“I forgot to say that the Germans shelled us with gas shells, so we had to fight with respirators and smoke helmets on. I think you will agree with me when I say that we had a good baptism.”

Well, I think it will be agreed that this is the letter of a young man who has found himself.

The other day I watched a regiment of Kitchener’s Army at work in Norfolk. The physique of the men was remarkable; they were stalwart, bronzed, healthy, hearty, happy. Willingness, esprit, were everywhere; but the thing that got deep into my mind was the quiet confidence and understanding between the officers and the men.

You would see an officer speaking to a lance-corporal as though to a friend, confidentially, as he stood with his company; and the lance-corporal replying with easy naturalness. There was no gap of formality between them. When their talk was finished—a talk upon work to be done or work done, something connected with the company—there was no lack of respect. Just as the soldier of old days would have done under the older system, the lance-corporal touched his cap.

Discipline was there, but something which made discipline a thing to have joy in, for it was a happiness in common effort for the honour of the regiment. All were playing the game of the Eleven.

One of the most remarkable aspects of this war in the field and in training for the field, is the wonderful happiness of the men. They may be fatigued and worn, but they are never downcast, and they are marvellously well-cared-for. Nothing has shown the perfect mechanism of our small army when war broke out so fully as the noiseless, smooth and unerring working of the machine. Scores of thousands of troops were moved across the Channel to the field of battle without a hitch, without the loss of a man, and never once was there lack of food and necessaries. The Council of Defence and the War Office had produced the most perfectly equipped and best army in the world—small as it was—and best perhaps because it was small.

From the first hour of mobilization the soldiers in the ranks got all they needed. Nothing has been too good for them as to food and necessaries, and even luxuries.

The love of the nation has been spent on them, but it has not been squandered. In the rough earthquake of war we have been shaken together. Horrible as it all is—the bloodshed, the

treasure poured out, the loss in life and material—still we can truthfully say that the nation has profited by its sacrifice, its effort, and its bereavement. National character has been made; inherent goodness has become magnificent merit.

In Parliament someone once said contemptuously of Socialism, "When that time comes we shall all be feeding out of the same municipal trough." Well, we are not doing that, but we are all working in the same national field.

There are some slackers—that has always been the case. There are some cowards, but they will not be able to escape the passion of loyalty which is spreading and forever spreading; which is tenfold greater than it was on the 4th of August, 1914.

Yes, your question as to whether drink has prevented Great Britain from rising to the height of her necessity during the year of war should be answered at this point.

I have seen in some American papers most cruel libels upon the British working man. I have seen London likened to Babylon or Byzantium. I have seen it stated in a Philadelphia paper that 90 per cent. of the people in this country are apathetic, and that this is all due to degeneracy, self-indulgence, and drink.

This is a charge of a ghastly nature; and if it were true, then the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah would be too good for Great Britain and this empire.

England has had great opportunities and vast responsibilities, and her people have done masterly and prodigious things, as her history shows. She has peopled overseas dominions; she has preserved, with a handful of men, the loyalty of the vast Indian empire; she has a commerce throughout the world greater than that of any other nation; her shipping represents more than half the world's shipping; and if her people were so degenerate as to fail the State in its hour of need and peril, then indeed should all the world turn their backs upon her.

I make this challenge, however: If half-a-dozen American journalists of repute and capacity will come to this country and will go into any city, town, or village in England, or come to this vast metropolis, and will take any street in any one of these villages, towns, or in any borough of London, I declare that he will find, not 90 per cent. apathetic, but 90 per cent. representing homes from which some person is gone to fight, to be trained to fight, is employed in the manufacture of munitions of war, or has relatives fighting, preparing to fight, or occupied in the manufacture of munitions of war, or some other work which is essentially war-work.

I know of what I speak. It has been tried. An American journalist has gone from house to house in one of the worst quarters of London, and the truth of my statement has been sustained. I make this challenge; I hope it will be accepted; I have no doubt of the result.

Drink there is and has always been in this country, and too much drink. Congestion—with poverty and crowded homes—of

great cities such as New York, Chicago, St. Louis, Philadelphia, Boston, or London, Paris, or Rome, and many others one knows, is the cause of excess.

There was a sudden, passionate outburst on the part of an English Minister to the effect that it was drink which prevented us from winning the war, through irregular work in the factories where munitions were made.

That was taken with great, even shocked, seriousness in this country; it was taken with infinitely greater seriousness in countries like the United States.

The same Minister who made that statement now declares that the lack of munitions was due to lack of organisation months ago. Both things are in part true, but only in part.

Undoubtedly in the rush and excitement, in the demand for extra output, a percentage of the workmen who drink and who ordinarily drink too much plunged into greater self-indulgence, and to some extent helped to disorganise the mass.

But again, if any one who knows this country will come here now, and go from town to town, village to village, and city to city, will make inquiry at public houses, will go to the usual saloon resorts, he will find that, though wages are higher, though there is more employment than there has been for many years, there is less drink, not more.

We have no right to expect the sympathy of the United States and of other neutral countries if England is more drunken now than she was; and we have a right to ask that, when these charges are made against her, investigation should also be made.

The responsibility of the people of this country is great, and American journalistic enterprise would only be doing its duty if it made the investigation which I suggest, since this great war is an international question, and the judgment of neutral nations must affect the end of it directly and indirectly.

The real result of the war has been, not to increase general depravity, but, through the greater inflow of money, to increase the depravity of those already depraved. There has been a great drain from industry into the army; certain industries have enormously increased their demand for labour; therefore the premium on the labour of the disreputable 10 per cent. of the drinking labouring classes has been vastly increased.

The misdoings of the 10 per cent. set up a certain amount of sympathetic demoralisation and interfere materially with sober workmen in jobs that require co-operation, as, for instance, the rivetters in shipbuilding.

This unsatisfactory minority is now being dealt with under powers granted by the Government, to the great satisfaction of labour as a whole, which repudiates the acts of the inevitable minority of degraded workers.

You ask me, "How has the war affected the suffrage movement and the suffrage disorders which were so widespread in this country over a year ago?"

Well, in the first place, immediately after the declaration of war, the Women's Social and Political Union called a meeting

and suspended the publication of their organ, *The Suffragette*, and mobilised all their members for national work: that is, nursing, production of clothing, relief work, &c.

The leaders of the suffragette movement soon saw that the individual devotion of its members was not enough, so they resolved to devote their vast organisation, as an organisation, to national purposes. Officially they organised recruiting meetings; they made a re-issue of *The Suffragette* as a war paper, which is doing good work in combating the stupid criticism of a small minority with cosmopolitan sympathies, who are full of the love of God and all their fellow creatures, and who would throw bouquets to murderers, because human sympathy is such a divine thing.

It is notable that the leaders of the suffragette movement desire a thorough settlement, that they want, not alone peace with honour, but peace of such a nature as shall see the world secured against a barbarous and aggressive militarism.

Miss Annie Kenney was asked by me whether the Social and Political Union approved of the Hague Peace Conference of Women.

The reply was: "No. We think the evolution of the woman movement in the last generation has produced two types—the success and the failure.

"The personnel of the Peace Conference represented the failure. We sent to The Hague one of our members to protest, and we saw that the conference was merely playing into Germany's hands. Every woman who attended that conference will one day bitterly repent it."

Miss Kenney was asked whether suffragette activity in the national cause would ultimately affect the question of the vote.

The reply was that the vote question was not in their minds, that the vote will come of itself; that if they knew for certain that it would be denied for an indefinite period they should still work every bit as strenuously as they were working now; that the greater cause comes before the less for all Britishers—the cause of liberty and democracy.

She said that if the Allies win the woman's cause will be at most retarded, but that if Prussianism wins the whole cause of freedom would be immeasurably weakened and set back; that women's suffrage would not merely be retarded, but removed from the sphere of possibility altogether. And Miss Kenney added:

"No. Our union is too sensible of the danger to tolerate any compromise with Prussianism. We have never been believers in compromise with injustice."

She was finally asked how she would sum up the present attitude of the suffragettes. The answer was very fine; and I, who have been opposed to the granting of the vote to women, frankly say that it is an utterance deserving of perpetual remembrance. This is what she said:

"Duties come before rights. We have dared to demand; we have also the courage to give to the uttermost."

That is what this war has done. It has made men and women who differ fundamentally in many things, who have opposed each other politically, meet with a common patriotism on the ground of deeper fundamentals still—on the ground of issues that affect the whole of civilisation, and not alone the social and political history of one country.

You have not asked me the question to which I am now going to reply, but I am going to ask it of myself. It is this :

“What has been the part played by the United States in this year of war? From the British standpoint, has she helped or retarded us?”

The account which we render of ourselves brings no blush to our cheeks, though we differ and criticise and gibe and challenge each other, as Britishers have always done; as Americans did in the time of their Civil War, when Lincoln’s heart was almost broken by opposition from his political foes, and by savage criticism of his friends. At this time we are all in a state not perfectly normal.

We are living, as it were, at the top of our being, and we are inclined to exaggerate, to be extravagant in denunciation or in criticism when things do not go as we think they ought to do, but go as they always do in war, with staggering ups and downs.

There are those among us who have thought that the United States, as a vast democracy inspired by high national ideals, and as the enemy of all reactionary and tyrannical elements, might have done more to help us in our fight for civilisation, might indeed have entered the war with us.

But let me say—and in this I believe I speak for the great majority of British people—that we have not had the least desire to invoke the armed assistance of the United States, or to influence her in the slightest in this matter.

The United States has performed immense service to the Allies by resisting all attempts to wean or force her from her neutrality by prohibiting the export of munitions of war. Her perfect propriety and adherence to the spirit of true neutrality have resisted German pressure.

Secondly, the services she has performed to civilisation by organising relief for Belgium have been a service to humanity, and therefore a service to the Allies, who are fighting to restore to Belgium her usurped dominion.

Thirdly, the United States has rendered immense services to this country by caring for the interests of British subjects abroad, and above all, by making the lot of British prisoners of war easier. Some of the worst cruelties and inhuman oppressions have been removed by her intervention.

Lastly, her sympathy, expressed in a thousand ways, and not the least by fair consideration of the action taken by Great Britain in the blockade and other matters, has eased the minds of millions of King George’s subjects. Lack of sympathy might easily have misinterpreted the acts of our Government.

I wish Americans would believe that in this country there has been since this war began a larger and truer understanding of the American people. For my own part I have known the United

States intimately for many years, and I have always had faith in her national purposes and confidence in her diplomatic integrity, and, from reading her history, a realisation of her sense of justice.

And in this war of ideals, fundamentally different, I believe the people of both nations have come to a sense of kinship and of mutual admiration, not diminished by the possible mistakes which may have been made by Great Britain largely due to improvised organisation, or in the United States by her rigid neutrality, which may not have seemed to chime with her sympathy.

American diplomacy has been unimpeachable, and we in Great Britain are grateful for an understanding which is as material a support as an army in the field.

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